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HOW AMERICAN AGRICULTURE CAN BE CIVIC

"Civic agriculture" may not be a widely known term, but a lot of people may be somewhat familiar with various forms of such agriculture without knowing the name. Civic agriculture in its most basic form means local production and consumption of food products that happens outside of mainstream supermarket chains. The consumer, producer and sometimes the processor involved have direct interaction with each other. Civic agriculture may often require conscious effort from producers, food processors and consumers to grow, process and eat locally as they have the economic and social well-being of their communities in mind. This happens when people wanting to help local farmers buy from them directly or when citizens start a food cooperative where locally produced, wholesome and, most likely, organic food can be purchased. However, the awareness of participants is not always a necessary requirement, as one can support civic agriculture without even realizing it. In a way, even a farmer's market and buying milk directly from a family farm can be viewed as a very rudimentary form of civic agriculture.

The term itself was coined by rural sociologist Thomas A. Lyson from Cornell University and described in his book entitled *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food and Community* published by Tufts University Press in Medford, Massachusetts in 2004. Lyson starts this important book with the statement that in the food and agriculture systems dominated by a "decades-old path of industrialization and globalization, a counter trend toward localizing some agriculture and food production has appeared." Such a trend has appeared or has been brought back to life in many well-developed countries; in France it is still very popular to buy fruit and vegetables from farmers, Italy has its "Slow Food" movement and more and more people in the United States no longer wish to be part of a "fast food nation." Lyson calls this trend a "rebirth of locally based agriculture and food production" (Lyson 2004: 1). In most cases, organizational forms of civic agriculture are not very formalized and the federal and local governments do not really collect data on them. Such forms include: roadside stands, farmers' markets, community gardens, U-pick operations where consumers can pick crops for themselves, restaurants that are supplied by local producers and community supported agriculture, the operations that come into being when a local community decides to support local agriculture in various ways. Community supported agriculture (CSA) can take various forms and these constitute probably the most advanced ways to practice civic agriculture, some of which are

very extremely successful cooperatives. Particular forms of CSA will be discussed later in the text.

Lyson's journey towards civic agriculture started in 1988, when he became the director of Cornell's Farming and Alternatives Programs. The program promoted more sustainable agriculture and food system in the state of New York. It was then that Lyson noticed that farmers' markets as well as community and school gardens had become part of the local scene and "small-scale food processors appeared on the radar screen" (Lyson 2004: XIII). These forms of production, processing, distribution and consumption connect people with their local community through food. Producers, processors and consumers have frequent direct interactions and the local community experiences economic benefits from such agriculture. In 1999, Lyson decided to call these types of economic activities "civic agriculture" to emphasize the involvement of local people.

To appreciate how difficult it is to produce and consume food locally one should look no further than any American supermarket. It is much easier to find a papaya from Brazil and Gala apples from New Zealand than locally grown corn or tomatoes. It can take some effort to find Maryland-grown apples in Maryland as most apples that are sold commercially in the United States come from the state of California and the state of Washington, not to mention other parts of the world. Similarly, finding strawberries from Illinois in Jewel supermarket chains in Illinois can be an impossible mission.

American agriculture is part of a global food supply chain that has disconnected food from its local context. In such a system traditional family farms that produce for consumers in their own county or state are on the decline. The main actors in the global food supply chain are agribusiness corporations that can have subcontractors in any part of the globe, use cheap labor in the Third World, and cheap transport to maximize their profits. Consequently, the world price of various agricultural raw products decreases to the detriment of family farmers in the United States, who cannot keep up with such competition. Big agribusiness in the United States can be quite independent from family farmers, but family farms are rarely able to escape dependence from large multinational corporations. Family farmers can either sell their products to big processors or wholesalers at a low price, often below their cost of production, or go out of business. Otherwise, they must find a third way and civic agriculture may provide such an alternative venue.

Therefore, if one wants to support family farming and eat locally, it makes a lot of sense to engage in "civic agriculture." Local food cooperatives, CSAs and farmers' markets may provide most of the food products that are grown and/or processed locally. Not only are the needs of the consumers to eat fresh, wholesome, sustainable and often organic foods met through civic agriculture, but also the communities that engage in it are able to retain more financial assets. Civic agriculture creates jobs within the local community that mainstream agriculture does not and gives a stimulus for local entrepreneurship. It often does so without putting too much strain on the natural environment.

Not only are the economic and environmental aspects of civic agriculture important to communities engaged in it. Civic agriculture can strengthen the identity of the community as well as its vitality if both consumers and producers perform activities that give preferences to local elements of the food supply chain. In fact, existence of

civic agriculture shortens the food supply chains as the food no longer has to be transported from distant parts of the United States or other countries to reach the tables of consumers. Thanks to civic agriculture the geographic distance between the producer and consumer gets reduced from thousands of miles to miles in double digits at the most. Therefore, civic agriculture "offers consumers real alternatives to commodities produced, processed and marketed by large agribusiness firms" (Lyson 2001: 1).

Consumers patronizing civic agriculture outlets do not really have to use mainstream supermarkets, or they only use them very seldom. They have an alternative to the globalized food system with its transnational corporations dominating every aspect of food production, processing and retailing. Although civic agriculture does not pose a serious economic challenge to the conventional agriculture and globalized food system, it makes communities less dependent on the commodities brought to consumers by large agribusiness firms.

Lyson enumerates six characteristics that make agriculture civic. They are the following:

1. Farming is oriented towards local markets and meeting the needs of local consumers rather than following the trends of national or international mass markets.

2. Agriculture is seen as an integral part of rural communities, not just a production of commodities.

3. Farmers are more concerned with making sure that their products are of high-quality: quantity and practices that keep costs low are not a priority.

4. Production at the farm level requires more labor and is usually more land and time intensive than production on corporate farms or even the conventional modern American farm. At the same time, civic agriculture farms are generally significantly smaller than industrial farms and need less capital to maintain their viability.

5. Producers rely more on local knowledge and less on "best management practices" than corporate farms do.

6. Producers ensure that they have direct links with the consumers. They try to avoid having middlemen such as wholesalers and brokers (Lyson 2004: 85).

The presence of civic agriculture, although increasing, is still much more subtle in the American landscape than the golden arches of McDonald's. Farmers' markets, food co-ops and community supported agricultural services may not be easy to find for those who want to buy from them; they are not in the foreground of the American food market. Consumers may need to do some research in their area to find such places and even add some extra time to getting their food products. Additionally, as civic agriculture food products are usually a little more expensive than products available through mainstream retailers, consumers have to be prepared for that financially. The benefits for consumers are healthy eating and putting such simple activities as buying groceries back into the community context. Getting food products at a farmers' market or having them delivered by a farmer gives consumers the awareness that such activities give support to family farms. Also, the pleasure aspect of a family trip to the farmers' market or U-pick operation is not to be ignored.

Community supported agriculture (CSA) can be a particularly interesting example of civic agriculture. Such enterprises can take various forms, and the most advanced ones are highly functioning cooperatives. They are established by groups of individuals or families who commit their resources such as money and/or labor to the

farm and in return receive part of the agricultural production from that farm. The shareholders participate in the costs, benefits and risks related to food production. If a farm has a good year, the shareholders receive a good selection of fruit and vegetables. If a farm incurs losses, so do the shareholders.

Although the shareholders cannot control all the factors that guarantee a good selection of agricultural products, CSAs are organized to meet the needs of their shareholders. "CSAs vary according to the level of financial and labor commitments of their members, their decision-making structures, ownership arrangements, and methods of payments and food distribution" (Lyson 2004: 88). There are 4 main types of CSAs:

1. The most basic form of CSAs are the ones that are farmer-directed. A farmer organizes it and manages it. The involvement of shareholders (who operate as subscribers) in everyday operations of the farm is minimal or none. They make payments before the season begins and throughout the season they receive a box of fruit and vegetables on a weekly basis. Farmers and subscribers agree on pick up/delivery arrangements. The decision on what to grow is mostly in the farmers' hands.

2. Consumer-directed CSAs are somewhat more advanced than the first type. A group of consumers finds a farmer who will produce for them. Member-consumers decide what will be grown and how, but farmers take part in these discussions. Members contribute money and may spend some time working on the farm.

3. Farmer-coordinated CSAs come into being when two or more farmers combine their resources and expertise in order to produce a wide variety of agricultural products: not only fruit and vegetables but also milk, eggs and perhaps meat. Each farmer specializes in one product or a small number of products. Such CSAs can serve a larger consumer base than individual farmers would ever be able to.

4. The last type are farmer-consumer cooperatives. A group of farmers and consumers buy land and equipment for a cooperative. Farmers and consumers have equal rights to make decisions about what is grown and under what conditions (Lyson 2004: 89).

All types of CSAs, as well as many other forms of civic agriculture, have the same goal: to establish and maintain a more local, more environmentally-friendly and more just for workers food system. At the same time the economic profitability for farmers needs to be ensured. Therefore, shareholders of CSAs and consumers who get their agricultural products from civic agriculture establishments are prepared to pay slightly more for them than for food available in supermarket chains. It can easily be inferred that the shareholders are people with sufficient disposable income who value good-quality food products and also care about the well-being of their local community.

Civic agriculture establishments have the best chance for success in semi-rural areas near big metropolises, inhabited by people who due to their income may be their likely consumers. In completely rural areas civic agriculture may not necessarily be an easily attainable option, as these areas are more affected by poverty than cities and their inhabitants may not have sufficient funds to become CSA shareholders or have time to explore local farmers' markets and U-pick operations. While popular imagination associates poverty with inner cities, "rural people have a higher likeli-

hood of being poor than urban residents, and some nation's most depressed areas are rural" (Brown, Swanson 2003: 2). As ironic as it sounds, rural America – the country's so-called "breadbasket" – has a number of places where people suffer from hunger or malnutrition. This is a consequence of many family farms going out of business, while corporate farms dominate the landscape. Unfortunately, in these rural areas where civic agriculture could help farmers and consumers the most, its establishments are not adequately represented at the moment. Fortunately, according to Thomas Lyson there is some evidence that such places are exploring civic agriculture. Before they can benefit from it they must develop preconditions for it, such as an adequate farmland base, good expertise in farming and processing and ability to promote products of civic agriculture as a way to improve the situation of the community as a whole.

Due to the relatively small area that civic agriculture can cover and the relatively low number of people who engage in it, food systems related to civic agriculture are relatively small. They may even appear minuscule when compared to the global food system, which connects the countries of the poor global South with the affluent North. In the global food system it is cheaper to produce food in Third World countries and pay for transport across the world than to produce it in the country of retail.

From the point of view of neoclassical economics and free market capitalism civic agriculture does not make sense. Its products have higher production costs and consequently are more expensive than the ones imported from South America and China. Also, individual civic agriculture establishments are small and quite often do not seek to grow larger – they go against basic capitalist trends and imperatives. "In the neoclassical model, the ideal form of production is a large firm. These are able to capture 'economies of scale' and hence produce goods more cheaply than smaller and presumably less efficient firms. From the neoclassical perspective, large producers link with large wholesalers, large wholesalers connect with large retailers, and large retailers serve the mass market. Large multinational corporations are driving engines in the development scenario" (Lyson, Tolbert 2003: 234).

What is the most efficient type of production and retail from the perspective of the free market proponents may not necessarily be the best for family farmers and rural or semi-rural communities. The concentration of commercial farms makes family farmers more dependent on large agribusiness: they operate in a highly competitive sector and in most cases have to buy from and sell to only a few agribusinesses. Family farmers usually have no means to transport food products to other parts of the country, so they have to rely on corporate wholesalers and processors that operate in their area. These large wholesalers and producers usually have the means to import from abroad and often have facilities in the countries of the Global South, where wages are low and environmental regulations are lax. Consequently, American family farmers do not play a significant part in setting the price and have to accept the price set by large agribusiness corporations and influenced by cheap imports. Farmers have become "price-takers, not price-makers," buying retail and selling wholesale, which creates very unequal terms of trade (Swanson, Skees 1991: 65). A certain number of farmers do not want to accept these rules, which they did not make, and try to make a living by defying the trends of mainstream agriculture.

Civic agriculture may be discussed as a phenomenon that goes against free market principles and "emphasizes humanistic concerns over profit," and in fact is a move towards a "kinder and gentler America" (Folk, Lyson 1991: 18). Civic agriculture may be a viable option for rural areas, if a civic community perspective is adopted and not an orthodox free market perspective. While a neoclassical economy and free market approach glorify globalization, a civil community approach focuses on local welfare, community and sustainability. Such a perspective, whose advocates include C. Wright Mills, Melville Ulmer and Walter Goldschmidt, views "smaller, locally-based enterprises as engines of rural economic development." The above authors in their various publications show that communities with a large variety of small, locally owned firms "manifested higher levels of social, economic and political welfare than places where the economic base was dominated by a few large absentee-owned firms" (Lyson, Tolbert 2003: 231).

While the neoclassical economy makes a clear division between economy and community, the civil community approach does not. In the second approach the economy is an integral part of the community – there is a "fusion of cooperation and competition" (Lyson, Tolbert 2003: 238) but the emphasis on cooperation is stronger. Therefore, agriculture can become civic when it is based on smaller-scale enterprises that cooperate rather than compete, and when it is motivated by welfare of the community and not driven by profit. Of course, it is essential that the civic agriculture operations are economically sustainable and bring some profit, but the vision of those involved in them goes beyond profit and individual success.

The stimuli for civic agriculture are most likely to come from within the community than be a result of the United States' government's concern for impoverished rural areas or policies that ensure that Americans eat nutritious food. With civil society groups operating at the local level, local governments and individuals can start a move towards civic agriculture. It should start from developing the awareness that the common good requires that particular individuals make their own input. Lyson states that establishing community-based local businesses, farmers' markets or food councils requires that local governments support them (Lyson 2004: 103). As local governments consist of people from the area who should have local community and a local food system in mind, it is only reasonable that civic agriculture initiatives should be promoted by them.

Civic agriculture is a very creative form of rural or semi-rural community development, which cannot thrive without the civil society at the level of the local community. At the same time it advocates civil society development. It gives consumers who are willing to frequent its operations an opportunity to participate in what Lyson calls "community capitalism" (Lyson 2004: 105) and get good quality food products at the same time. And although the prize for such goods may be higher than the one for cheap imports in the supermarket chains, one can be sure that no agricultural worker has been abused or inadequately compensated in the process. The higher price for civic agriculture products means that more financial assets will be circulating in the community and not cashed in by the CEOs of big multinational companies.

Civic agriculture currently comprises a tiny fraction of American agriculture, but the percentage of civic agriculture products in American households and the importance of the community-based economy can grow over time. While more and more

Americans contest the system that allows multinational corporations to control food and agriculture from "stable to the table," civic agriculture has a lot to offer: a viable counter-model of a food system, advancement of communities, and a less negative impact on the environment. For all these reasons civic agriculture needs to be promoted and positively sanctioned by local governments, churches and civil society groups.

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